



King's Research Portal

Document Version

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Greene, S. (2009). Shifting media and the failure of political communication in Russia. In B. Beumers, S. Hutchings, & N. Rulyova (Eds.), *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals* (pp. 56-70). Routledge.

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

3 Shifting media and the failure of political communication in Russia

Samuel A. Greene

One of the key puzzles in contemporary Russian history is the failure of civil society to mobilise around what would appear to be massive common grievances. There are, undoubtedly, numerous causes for this, among which may be such widely reported phenomena as low social capital and a deeply ingrained mistrust of collective action. Basic political theory, however, suggests another factor that may be important in the reticence of Russians to prevent the return to authoritarianism so widely trumpeted in international headlines: the media. Thus, in 1772, David Hume wrote:

It is apprehended, that arbitrary power would steal in upon us, were we not careful to prevent its progress, and were there not an easy method of conveying the alarm from one end of the kingdom to another. The spirit of the people must be frequently roused, in order to curb the ambition of the court; and the dread of rousing this spirit must be employed to prevent that ambition. Nothing so effectual to this purpose as the liberty of the press, by which all the learning, wit and genius of the nation may be employed on the side of freedom, and everyone be animated to its defence. (Hume [1772] 1994: 3)

Some seventy years later, Alexis de Tocqueville echoed the thought: ‘Nothing but a newspaper can drop the same thought into a thousand minds at the same moment’ ([1840] 1994: 111).

The prevailing view of the media in Russia – at least as far as political communication is concerned – is highly pessimistic. President Vladimir Putin is seen to have imposed a ‘neo-authoritarian media system’, in which direct or indirect state control is stifling free expression (see, for example: Becker 2004). Certainly, this is true: by no means can Russian media be considered free, and the state’s role in the sector is nothing short of pernicious. But that is only part of the story and does not explain why, even in the freest sectors of the Russian media and even prior to the re-imposition of repression, the Russian media have since 1991 consistently failed to play the aggregating and galvanising role described by Hume and de Tocqueville.

Unfortunately, contemporary research on Russian media, while thorough and informative, has fallen somewhat behind the field. The problem, this chapter ar-

gues, is that it is insufficient to treat the Russian media solely as a dependent variable, afflicted and distorted by various exogenous factors. A recent trend in the study of media and communications has begun, in its proponents' words, to 'bring the sociology of the media back in', challenging researchers 'to bring . . . sophisticated analysis to bear on understanding media as an *independent* variable, as part of the process of political meaning making rather than just a convenient indicator of the outcome' (Benson 2004: 276).

Marshall McLuhan famously wrote that, for those interested in understanding the link between the media and social change, 'the medium is the message'. He explained:

This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. (McLuhan 1994: 7)

The importance of media, in other words, lies in the relationships and modes of interaction that they foster. And if this is true, then the significance of both content and technology are best evaluated through the prism of the social processes they engender. Thus, Sonia Livingstone differentiates between 'socially new' and 'socially old' media, writing that we recognise true novelty when 'a key consequence of new media technologies is the transformation of the audience itself' (Livingstone 1999: 64). To this, Terhi Rantanen (2002) adds the logical element of scale, although this should not be taken to imply that bigger is necessarily better.

Seen from this angle, the equation that links the media to civil society becomes less abstract. By placing the media at the centre of the analysis, we no longer assume an organic, if somewhat mystical, relationship, in which free media and democracy go hand in hand so long as the state and other villains stay out of the way. Instead, we can get a clearer view of how the interplay of the various actors that inhabit the media space either encourages or inhibits fortuitous developments. This article approaches this task by means of a simple comparison. Taking as subjects the freest media sectors in the pre-1991 Soviet Union and post-1991 Russia – *samizdat* and regional independent newspapers, respectively – it asks why the former appears to have been so much more successful than the latter in galvanising civil society. The answer, I will argue, lies in the specific workings of the media themselves. While *samizdat* was inherently and inextricably tied to the Soviet dissident movement, even those Russian newspapers that are potentially most virtuous are governed by internal logics that militate against the development of a true fourth estate.

***Samizdat* and independent Soviet political discourse**

Any discussion of the meaning and significance of *samizdat* must begin by defining the term. The word itself – which is an abbreviation for 'self-publishing' – is somewhat misleading, especially in an era of desktop publishing, the Internet and photocopiers. It is not enough simply to note that *samizdat* is independent (of the

state) and (usually) non-commercial. *Samizdat* is a social phenomenon, a very specific and highly participatory mode of multilateral communication, in which the act of participation is more important than what is actually being communicated.

Aleksandr Daniel', a former participant in *samizdat* and currently a researcher on Soviet dissent, defines *samizdat* as 'that specific method for disseminating socially significant, uncensored texts, in which the multiplication and distribution of texts takes place outside the purview of the author, within the readership'; in this context, 'the publisher and the reader are one and the same' (Daniel' 2003). In the classic *samizdat* process, readers re-published and distributed whatever texts they found interesting, usually by making carbon copies on onion-skin paper with a typewriter. For the most part, *samizdat* was a grass roots, de-centralised and non-organised initiative. Individuals produced what they wanted to read and passed it to close friends, who then reproduced it and passed it to others.

That definition of process suggests the second crucial factor – that of motivation. *Samizdat* was literally created by those who demanded it, and the demand was for literature that could not be obtained in any other way. According to Liudmila Alekseeva,

samizdat was created by a combination of factors. On the one hand, society's recognition that much is hidden from it and that it is lied to. Second, the maintenance of censorship, which shows society that it is being lied to, that the truth is being hidden from it, and that it does not have the ability to use a printing press to say what it wants to say. And third, the availability of typewriters. (Alekseeva 2003)

Censorship, of course, is also a social phenomenon, going well beyond the simple regulatory prohibition of published dissent. As Jan Plamper notes (2001), censorship in the Soviet Union was in large part aimed at the abolition of ambiguity, banning symbolic and suggestive approaches to literature – regardless of content – in favour of a realist doctrine inherently devoid of connotation. Alekseeva states that 'it was impossible to express almost any human emotion with such censorship. Eventually it just became ridiculous: you couldn't even get the poetry of Okudzhava and Vysotskii. They weren't printed, even though they weren't the least bit anti-Soviet' (Alekseeva 2003).

Thus, *samizdat* began as a means of publishing literature (primarily poetry) that people wanted to read but that was not published by the state. This trend began with poets from Russia's Silver Age, and then moved into work from more contemporary poets (Sadomskaia 2003). The 1960s saw the introduction of more prose, including translations of contemporary Western classics, and the work of Russian writers (Daniel' 2003). Crucially, poets and writers began to see *samizdat* not as a last recourse after being rejected by the official press, but as the medium of choice.

Simultaneously, the content of *samizdat* began to change. The politicisation of the content of *samizdat* – as opposed to the form, which was inherently politi-



Figure 3.1 Liudmila Alekseeva, the chairman of the Moscow Helsinki Group, at a meeting with human rights defenders and representatives of the press in memory of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, 30 August 2007. Photo by Kirill Tulin, courtesy of Kommersant Photo Archive.

cised – began in 1956, with the clandestine distribution of Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’, detailing some of the atrocities of Stalin’s terrors.

Alongside the Khrushchev report, *samizdat* distributed reports from Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia, including Yugoslav newspaper reports on the events in Hungary in 1956 (Vail’ 2003). A similar dynamic continued into the late 1960s, with the publication of Abel Agenbegian’s economic analysis of the socialist system, as well as foreign materials on the events in Czechoslovakia. Indeed, the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia became something of a turning point in the development of *samizdat*: ‘After the troops went into Czechoslovakia, new protest letters were written immediately and were distributed immediately. After that, any time something major happened, for example, if someone was sentenced, the reaction in *samizdat* was always very quick’ (Vol’pina 2003).

It is important to challenge a piece of inherited wisdom on *samizdat*, namely Feldbrugge’s assertion that, because *samizdat* was usually published anonymously, it lacked the solidaristic relationship between reader and writer that we expect to arise at a western newspaper, whose readers see by-lines and may know the address of the newsroom (Feldbrugge 1975: 19). This is, first and foremost, not true. Issues of *Khronika*, for example, usually contained a note asking readers to pass information for or about the publication up the distribution chain, where it would eventually reach the writer and/or editor (Daniel’ 2003).

More fundamentally, however, such an assertion fails to get at the heart of the most basic distinction between a traditional publication and *samizdat*. The ‘*sam*’ in *samizdat* (‘self’ in self-publishing) does not refer to the ability of the writer to publish what he or she wants to write; rather, it refers to the ability of the reader to publish what he or she wants to read. Thus, the success in terms of circulation of any particular *samizdat* publication depends entirely and exclusively on readers’ interest. No other modern media system can make that claim.

Those authors who did publish their addresses and/or telephone numbers, meanwhile, found that readers responded in much the same way as they do to community newspapers in different contexts. This dynamic clearly raised the potential authority and social significance of *samizdat* well beyond that attainable by the official press and thus presented a threat to the regime. As Daniel' notes, 'samizdat activity was seen as oppositional if not by the authorities themselves, then by the system of prohibitions that they spawned' (Daniel' 2003).

The Brezhnev regime's broad acquiescence to the reality of *samizdat* – leaving the bulk of it alone, while going after those who most directly challenged the regime – gave way to a much less tolerant stance under Andropov. Frequent raids, confiscations and arrests in the early 1980s disrupted but did not stop *samizdat* activity (Daniel' 2003; Vail' 2003). Ironically, it was Gorbachev who brought on the death of *samizdat*. To a certain extent, this is intuitive. Asked when *samizdat* ended in the USSR, Liudmila Alekseeva replied: 'When censorship ended' (Alekseeva 2003). That, however, hides a more important phenomenon. By allowing freer access to printing and distribution, *glasnost* meant that the writers who had earlier fed *samizdat* could become publishers as well (see, for example, Grigoryants 1989). Once that happened, the essence of *samizdat* – the unification of the role of reader and publisher – evaporated (Daniel' 2003). If only by a few years, the Soviet Union outlived *samizdat*, not because of successful repression, but because the medium itself had ceased to send a message.

The old-new Russian media

Looking for free media in today's Russia is not as thankless a task as it might initially seem. Any casual observer who happens to speak Russian will note the presence, to this day, of critical newspapers, radio stations and even television broadcasts. Some, such as the weekly *Novaia gazeta*, are outright oppositional. Nor does ownership appear to be an iron barrier. The radio station Ekho Moskvy, broadly seen as the mouthpiece of anti-Putin democrats, manages to retain editorial independence despite being majority owned by Gazprom, the state-dominated natural gas monopoly that has, admittedly, kept NTV television on a much shorter leash. Even official state mouthpieces, such as *Rossiiskaia gazeta* and the television channel Kul'tura, frequently carry direct criticism of the government.

The problem, however, comes when we remember that 'the media' is a term that is both plural and aggregate, referring to a space created, maintained and populated by numerous actors. These actors, in turn, are collectively responsible – and, so, individually hardly responsible at all – for the character of that space. Where such a space exists, the actions of individuals within it begin to carry a dual meaning. The first is content-specific and peculiar to the individual media outlet, what we might call the message. The second meaning is created by the broader resonance of that message through the social interactions of mediated communication described by McLuhan. Thus, the meaning of the publication of *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* as an individual news outlet was amplified by the fact that *Khronika* was part of a broader media space called *samizdat*. In contem-

porary Russia, though, the likes of *Novaia gazeta*, Ekho Moskvyy and scattered publications and broadcasts in other outlets are not sufficient to create a ‘free media space’ distinct from the overall Russian media space – which is decidedly not free. Their message may stand out, but there is not a logic to them that would separate them from the rest, the way *samizdat* stood out against *Pravda* and the rest of the Party press.

The print media offer most scope for a ‘free media space’. Tabloids, glossy magazines and other entertainment-only publications can be left aside, as they do not carry political communication. Likewise, *Rossiiskaia gazeta* notwithstanding, government-owned periodicals can be disregarded as structurally unlikely to be independent. The major Moscow-based daily newspapers, some of which have nationwide circulation, are freer than the central television channels but are generally under the thumb of one or another major political/economic sponsor – the most dominant of which, increasingly, is the state. All that remains are local, privately owned general-interest newspapers. Most Russian towns of any size have at least one such newspaper, usually published weekly. The majority were founded in the early 1990s and are owned by their editors and managers, often a small group of friends or relatives. They are subject to the same failings as the rest of the Russian media, including corruption and capture by sponsors, but many of them are profitable to a degree that allows them to resist the more egregious depths of ‘selling out’ common in other sectors (Eismont and Greene 2005). And on the most basic level, unlike all of the other media categories mentioned above, there is no obvious structural factor that would preclude these newspapers from forming a free media space in Russia.

To select the newspapers to be studied here, I have followed Michael Burawoy’s method (1998, 2003) and allowed the cases to select themselves. All of the newspapers described below are finalists for and/or participants in the Russian Independent Print Media Program, a four-year training and technical support initiative financed by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by the New Eurasia Foundation.¹ As such, prior to being studied they were all assessed to meet a set of basic criteria, including that they be ‘committed to ethical principles of independent journalism, be reader-oriented and socially responsible, be an independent and honest business’ and not ‘controlled by [the] state or oligarchs, . . . mouthpieces of political parties or power groups, . . . [or] engaged in any kind of xenophobic propaganda’. The criteria also excluded niche publications and the local editions of Moscow-based or national network publications. All of the information presented was gathered through on-site and off-site interviews and direct observation, conducted between September 2004 and September 2005. Because of potential political sensitivities, the identities of research subjects are withheld.

Most independent local and regional newspapers in Russia, like *samizdat* publications in the Soviet Union, arose because of a need perceived by their creators. This fact is not as banal as it might seem at first glance. The key point here is that, among the various motivations that drove these editors and publishers to launch their newspapers in the early 1990s, profit is rarely among them. That many of

them evolved into successful businesses is secondary; what is important is that, for most, the perceived need had much more to do with mediated communication than with the accumulation of capital.

Broadly speaking, local and regional independent newspapers in Russia can be divided into three categories, based on the motivational logics of their creators and managers. The general assertion made above is true for the first two of these categories: paternalistic newspapers, activist newspapers. A third category, what we might call profiteering newspapers, proves a partial exception. The remainder of this section will deal with each of these categories in detail.

Paternalistic Newspapers

Newspapers that fall into the ‘paternalistic’ category see themselves – and, in their view, proper journalism as a whole – as part of a tradition dating back to Herzen and *Kolokol*. In this model, the newspaper sees itself as part of the cultural and intellectual elite, endowed with a clear, bird’s-eye view of the community and charged with a civilising mission. Often, such newspapers were created because their founders had something to say that was not being said in other local media.

A typical example is *SFD1*, a weekly newspaper in a large city in Russia’s Southern Federal District. The city itself has a population of approximately 1 million, with a total of 5 million in the surrounding *oblast’*. Describing the newspaper’s genesis, the executive director (and daughter of the founder and editor-in-chief) said: ‘The newspaper was created in 1991 as a means of political activity, a means of self-expression, so that there would be at least some kind of opposition. We didn’t think about it as an enterprise that needs to bring in money.’²

Initially, that ‘self-expression’ meant providing a counterpoint to the communist-dominated leadership of the city and the region, backed up by reporting on a full range of issues – which is true of many other paternalistic newspapers. As a result, journalists at such newspapers generally feel freer than journalists at other types of media to delve into controversial issues and avow a range of opinions. Thus, one of the reporters at *SFD1*, who had worked earlier at other local newspapers, said that despite uncompetitive wages, ‘I like it here because my bosses don’t tell me what or how to write.’ At *FEFD1*, a weekly newspaper in a large city in the Far East Federal District, a senior writer said that ‘the best thing about this newspaper is it’s “opposition-ness”. There are topics that no one else other than us in our region will ever write about.’³ At *CFD2*, a weekly newspaper in a mid-sized town in the Central Federal District, the editor said that ‘we feel that we are special. Our journalists know that we can do things that others can’t.’⁴

Likewise, paternalistic newspapers generally take a strongly principled stand on issues of independence and objectivity. Many have adopted western-style codes of ethics and banned paid articles and unmarked advertising. They are also usually careful to avoid close contact with political interests, even when they may agree ideologically with those interests. In one example, the owner of *VFD2*, a small-town weekly in the Volga Federal District, was approached by the local leader of the Union of Right Forces, one of Russia’s two largest liberal parties, offering to sponsor the newspaper financially in return for favourable coverage. The

owner, himself a liberal, said: 'I told him, "If you really believe in liberal ideas, then you'll understand that I cannot have anything to do with you."' ⁵

Over time, however, the 'self' that was being expressed at *SFDI* was increasingly the figure of the editor and founder, a self-professed champion of the small farmer who was eager for the newspaper to serve a rural audience. In the editor's words, 'this is a newspaper for the villager, for a good, strong peasant family, with its own little plot of land. The mission is to strengthen the status of the rural landowner.'

Thus, a review of the archives shows that in 1995, when the newspaper had its peak circulation of approximately 120,000, it contained a broad mix of general-interest materials on issues such as taxes, pensions and currency reform, as well as advice, popular science and so on. By 1997, the content had been heavily tailored down to the perceived interests of the villager, a trend that continues to the present day; at the time this research was conducted, the newspaper had a circulation of 26,500.

At the newsroom's weekly *letuchka* meeting, during which the staff review the previous issue of the paper, there was an argument about what sorts of stories the newspaper should cover – reportedly a recurring theme at these meetings. Some of the staff were upset about a large article on the Kyoto climate protocols, with one person complaining, 'that's not peasant information'. Some of the older staff complained about a complimentary article about an old crony of Stalin, while younger staff objected that 'readers in the villages like Stalin'. One young staff writer said: 'The ordinary peasant is not going to read us. Our newspaper is oriented more towards the village intelligentsia. Otherwise, if we write about Stalin, they'll read us; if not, they won't.'

Privately, journalists at the newspaper – most of whom are from the city and have never lived in a village – concede that they feel too far divorced from the editor's target audience to serve that audience well. One said that 'our mission is to help and enlighten villagers. But very little of what we write is really interesting to peasants. I don't think any of us really knows what the world of the peasant is really like.' Tellingly, after the *letuchka* meeting, some of the writers made light of the concept of 'the village intelligentsia', wondering aloud whether such a group actually exists.

Indeed, this problem – when the audience imagined by the editorial leader and the really existing potential audience are often out of synch – appears to be common among paternalistic newspapers. A similar effect, though driven by a somewhat different dynamic, can be observed at *FEFDI*. There, in the late 1990s the owner-editor decided that the newspaper should serve a combination of consumers and entrepreneurs, with a mission of *vospitanie* – a combination of upbringing and education, the way one raises a child – for the participants of the new market economy. Currently, the newspaper has a circulation of approximately 8,000, of whom the editor estimates some 27 per cent are entrepreneurs. That circulation is down from a peak of 33,000 in 1996, when the newspaper's archives – like those of *SFDI* – show a much broader range of topics and, in particular, considerably more politics. The editor, however, is firm in his belief that the new course is better: 'People are sick to death of politics. No one needs an exposé any more. For

our long-time readers, I keep some of the social themes that no one other than us will write about. But I'm moving in a different direction.'

As a result, rather than reflecting the whole range of interaction between journalists, sources and readers, *SFDI*, *FEFDI* and other paternalistic newspapers reflect almost exclusively the insulated worldview of their editors. This view, moreover, places the newspaper and its producers outside of the society that contains its readers, as a foreign element with a specific mission and role to play. Indeed, in a training seminar for newspaper editors, when asked to locate his newspaper on a simple scheme including 'the state' and 'society', the editor of *VFDI*, a small weekly in the Volga Federal District, chose a point equidistant from both; most of the other editors present agreed.⁶ In the best case, this removal filters the dialogue between media producer and media user through the ideology of the former. In the worst case, it makes such a dialogue impossible.

Activist Newspapers

At first glance, activist newspapers may not seem to differ greatly from their paternalistic counterparts. Like paternalistic newspapers, they are often created as a means of expression, driven by opposition to the prevailing political powers at the time the newspaper was founded. Similarly, they are also strongly beholden to the ideologies of their leaders. Unlike paternalistic newspapers, however, activist newspapers are generally very closely tied into their communities, which in turn are usually smaller than those that host paternalistic newspapers. And unlike paternalistic newspapers, they are frequently deeply and directly involved in local politics.

A typical example is *FEFD3*, a weekly newspaper in an economically depressed medium-sized city in the Far East Federal District, near the Chinese border. The newspaper is owned and run by five friends, all in their fifties and sixties, who used to work together at the local factory newspaper in Soviet days. Ironically, it is that Soviet heritage that informs the newspaper's activism. According to the newspaper's general manager:

Our newspaper has its own pride. We preserve the best traditions of Soviet journalism: social issues and social justice. Before, newspapers used to work on a higher level. [. . .] We all came out of Soviet journalism, and so we take an active civic position. Maybe that's not so good from the point of view of a commercial newspaper, but I continue to believe, although I may be alone in this, that we need to pay a lot of attention to issues of local government, to budget transparency, for example. In those sorts of issues, we are the initiators. We also have a humanitarian mission. We try to save people, to collect money for the sick. It's a newspaper with a human face.⁷

On a day-to-day basis, this translates into relatively objective and high-quality journalism, achieved in part by giving journalists the sort of free rein also seen at paternalistic newspapers. Says one reporter at *FEFD3*: 'The point is to help people make sense of what's going on around them, but not to force your opinion

on them. Some newspapers can't really achieve that. We can. No one dictates to us what to write, what to do.' This is coupled with a refusal to engage in influence-peddling. Again, the general manager said: 'People don't give us [money for influence], and we don't take. All you need is to take \$10,000 once, and you're dependent for life. We can write about anything, and no one can tell us what to do. They know we would tell them to take a hike.' The only real exception in the newspaper's coverage is the issue of illegal logging. 'We can't go up against the mafia', the general manager said.

Similar in spirit is *FEFD4*, also a weekly in a smaller town in the Far East Federal District, all of whose thirty-three coal mines are now defunct and where unemployment is well above 50 per cent. Published by four people – two of whom have other day jobs – the newspaper is known locally for standing up to the city administration, the only real local institution with money. 'We didn't set out to be oppositional, we just want to live in a normal city', the editor said.⁸

From a business standpoint, this approach appears to be more successful than the paternalistic model. At *FEFD3*, circulation stands at 17,000 – larger than at most paternalistic papers in much larger cities – and is slowly growing, while circulation at most of the paternalistic newspapers cited earlier is falling. *FEFD3*'s general manager said: 'It's something of a paradox. On the one hand, the city is dying. There is no future here. It should be impossible for us to be successful. But the newspaper is growing and growing. Even if we raise prices, people keep buying it, despite their miniscule purchasing power.' *FEFD4* has a circulation of approximately 6,000, which is significant in a town with only 3,000 telephones.

This in part lends these newspapers a degree of confidence that allows them to be more adventurous journalistically. *FEFD3* has for much of its existence written critically of the local administration, which led at one point to the fire-bombing of the general manager's apartment, but the newspaper has survived. These newspapers correspondingly have relatively low turnover and display a higher level of dedication among their staff than do paternalistic newspapers. The owner-editor of *FEFD4* and her teen-aged son, who is also distribution manager once he has completed his homework, were once driving the entire print run of an issue in their van back from the printing house, approximately 100 kilometres away, when the van's engine caught fire. Stopped by the side of the road on the edge of the taiga, with no way to douse the fire, the two nonetheless made repeated trips into the burning van to salvage issues of the newspaper.

The positive potential of this model is illustrated in one case – that of the aforementioned *CFD2* – in which a newspaper made the transition from the paternalistic model to the activist model. The newspaper, owned and run by a husband-and-wife team of old Soviet journalists, used to operate with much the same mentality of *SFD1*, undertaking to educate and raise its readers. Under the influence of a USAID-funded training programme, however, the pair began to take cautious steps at removing their personal opinions from articles and allowing their reporters to take the lead in identifying and pursuing issues. They also undertook a readership study and created mechanisms for readers to better communicate their own concerns to the newsroom. The editor said:

The first thing that happened was that we became less ambitious. About five times less ambitious. We used to want to tackle everything. Now our priorities are more concrete. And, in the end, our readers have surprised us. We used to think worse of them. We used to think of them as sort of the unshaven, unkempt masses.

This shift, moreover, coincided with a financial scandal involving the local government, a Moscow investment bank and a mining company, a topic the newspaper would have previously ignored as too sophisticated for its readers. Instead, it investigated and produced a series of articles that had national resonance but also won the admiration of readers. Over the course of the scandal, the newspaper's circulation rose to 20,000, in a town of 96,000. The editor credits that success with preventing the local government from shutting the newspaper down:

When we were taken to court, I was surprised to see regular people in the courtroom. They were our readers. When I asked them why they came, they said it was to make sure that nothing happened to their newspaper. I think the authorities notice something like that. A lot of the voters in our city are our readers.

But this sort of activism also leads to a direct involvement in politics. The general manager of *FEFD3* relates:

We once took the tax authorities to court, just out of principle. We wanted to put them in their place. And there was one local businessman, very smart, who also went to court against the tax authorities. We supported him, and then made him a city councilman, and then deputy mayor. We haven't made him mayor yet. He's not quite ready. But we will do it. Essentially, we are his election headquarters.

In this and similar cases, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the newspaper's newsroom and the candidate's campaign headquarters.

There is, as yet, nothing other than healthy scepticism to suggest that this sort of relationship, should the newspapers' favoured candidate win, might lead to a loss of independence for either of these newspaper. To the contrary, the editors say they will turn on their current political friends should those politicians not live up to expectations. And, despite these misgivings, the activist model might seem more favourable than the paternalistic model. At the very least, the activist model places the newspaper squarely within society – a fact that is evidently perceived by readers and rewarded with higher circulations. There is, however, the illustrative case of another transition, this time from the activist to the profiteer model, the pitfalls of which are explored in the next section.

Profiteer Newspapers

Profiteer newspapers arise out of a wide variety of circumstances, sometimes intentionally, other times not. What separates them clearly from the two prior categories is that they are managed specifically for the purpose of making money; what separates them from other profit-oriented media businesses is that their profit strategy extends beyond the classical model of selling advertisements and circulation.

A typical example is *FEFD2*, a twice-weekly newspaper in a large city in the Far East Federal District.⁹ In its early years, it was squarely in the activist model, known as one of the most crusading newspapers in the region. Among its reporters was Grigorii Pasko, who uncovered environmental abuses by the Russian navy and was tried for espionage as a result. As with the activist newspapers described above, some of *FEFD2*'s reporters got directly involved in politics, serving as campaign advisers for the candidates they favoured. Initially independent of any of the local political or business groups, the newspaper picked the losing side in a mayoral race, and its owners – rather than risk retaliation in a notoriously violent city – quickly sold the business and left town. In the words of one reporter, 'We have lost our freedom of speech'.

The new owners – a pair of twenty-something entrepreneurs who made their money selling billboard advertising – took over the business with a clear strategy. The twenty-three-year-old part-owner said:

We bought the business in order to make money. I invested my own personal money back in 2001. Times were good then. But times have changed. We used to have a good relationship with the authorities, but the authorities have changed, and our relationship has changed. The authorities aren't interested in giving anymore, only taking. Now, we're trying to be neutral. If we put ourselves in opposition, they'll shut us down quite quickly. [...] A newspaper is always a political instrument. Beyond the regional and city administrations, there is the city *duma*, the regional assembly. They need to promote themselves, right? We just need to be faster at reacting to these potential clients than our competitors.

As a result, unlike at the paternalistic and activist newspapers where the figure of manager and editor is often one and the same, in profiteer newspapers such as *FEFD2* the editor is generally strictly subordinated to the manager. The latter, in turn, is responsible for generating orders for articles, which are then to be executed by the editor and journalists. At *FEFD2*, where this control is particularly strict, all major news stories are filtered through the manager prior to publication, not so much to avoid controversy as to identify opportunities for profit.

Another example is *FEFD6*, a weekly newspaper in a small Siberian city. In this case, the newspaper was started in the paternalistic mould.¹⁰ The owner said that the other newspapers there 'are faceless and toothless. [Our newspaper] was the only one that was able to be oppositional, and people turned to us for that. People looked for us. But that ended. Advertising took over. That's life.'

Gradually, the newspaper's advertising staff became better and better at selling advertising, and, given the newspaper's relative popularity, advertisers were looking to buy. Advertising literally did take over, to the point where, by mid-2004, it covered the entirety of the front page and left only two full pages (out of a minimum of twenty-four) for news. Again, the owner said: 'I don't know how it happened. It just did.'

At *FEFD7*, another profiteering weekly in a remote Far Eastern city, a young trainee employee displayed the same functional confusion that the reporters/political consultants did at *FEFD2*. Having trained both in the newsroom and the advertising department, she was asked whether she wanted to work in advertising or journalism. Her response: 'Actually, I'd like to work in both. I think it's an interesting challenge, to figure out what an advertiser needs, and then help them achieve that on the news pages'.¹¹ Her editor smiled approvingly.

Not all profiteering need be so overtly pernicious. At *FEFD5*, a weekly in the same large Far Eastern city as *FEFD2*, the editorial staff are allowed a fair amount of independence, and the newspaper is one of the best and most successful in the city. In this case, the profits sought by the owner and founder were not financial:

I was forced to open the paper. In 1996, I needed it as a life raft. I used to be involved in trading, and I was having problems with the authorities. I needed the newspaper to defend myself. Later, I liked having my finger on the pulse of information. We are able to influence events, and we don't want to be like everyone else.¹²

For all of these profiteering newspapers, readers are at best a commodity, and at worst a nuisance. Where profit is derived from rampant advertising, readers are needed to gain a competitive advantage; this is the most akin to the standard western newspaper model, with the key difference lying in the fact that these newspapers reach a scale of advertising that crowds out news. Where profit is derived from politics and influence, readers are less important; what matters is the ability of the newspaper to drop a piece of information according to a client's paid instructions into the broader media space, where it could be picked up by television. In none of these cases, however, is mediated communication a significant part of the model; the newspaper is thus deprived even of the first of the two meanings described earlier – the message.

Conclusions: the defensive reflex and the failure to communicate

At the lowest ebb of the *samizdat* phenomenon in the Soviet Union, when repression was driving the medium further and further underground, a new phenomenon began to arise. Natal'ia Sadomskaia recounts the story of an event that happened after her partner, Boris Shragin, wrote and published in *samizdat* a letter in defence of Aleksandr Ginzburg, to which he attached his address. Sadomskaia recalls:

And one morning, at about six or seven o'clock, there was a ring at the door. We were quite frightened, because Boris had already been kicked out of the Party and fired from work, and we were really expecting him to be arrested. I opened the door on the chain and asked, 'Who's there?' The main asked for Boris Shragin. 'On what business?' I asked. . . . 'On urgent business.' I opened the door and saw a man in glasses carrying a briefcase. And he didn't come in . . . saying, 'You understand, I want Boris Shragin to write about the horrors at the Lenin Library.' 'What horrors?' I asked. He replied: 'The cafeteria is very bad. They're stealing, and it's impossible to eat what they serve.' (Sadomskaia 2003)

Remarkably similar stories are told by the staff of many of the newspapers referred to above. Thus, a reporter at *FEFD3* said: 'The city government reads us carefully. The elevator in my building was fixed after I complained about it.' The editor of *SFD1* sums up the phenomenon as follows: 'Our reader is used to seeing this newspaper as his last line of defence. We are forced to play that role, and, to be honest, we want to play this role.'

On the one hand, this would seem to speak to a relationship between newspaper and reader that is almost quaint. It also reflects back on old Soviet practices, when readers would frequently write with run-of-the-mill household complaints to their favourite newspapers. However, when de Tocqueville speaks of 'dropping the same thought into the thousand minds', or when Hume writes of 'conveying the alarm from one end of the kingdom to the other', they were not referring to broken elevators and unpalatable cafeteria food. They were, rather, referring to what I have already called a true media space, in which each participant is extended and interconnected, giving messages greater resonance. The message of a faulty elevator may well be carried by the newspaper to the relevant authorities, but that is not the desired effect. The fact that a newspaper might take pride in serving such a role only underscores the profound silence that follows the dropping of these messages into the broader Russian media space. It is a silence that all of these newspapers seem powerless to overcome.

Samizdat did not bring down the Soviet Union, but it did transform it. Among its most avid readers were not just dissidents, but also members of the *nomenklatura* elite, and the counterpoint that it provided to the official line hastened the bankruptcy of Bolshevik ideology. It was able to do this in part because it extended the proverbial Russian 'kitchen table', that special place in which conversation is always open and honest. *Samizdat*, in effect, put everyone around the same kitchen table, passing the same thoughts on onion-skin paper from one end of the country to the other. *Samizdat's* technological unification of the reader and publisher created a natural solidarity of purpose, which is broken in newspapers today.

When given the opportunity, writers still write what they want to read (as well as what they want to write). In the profiteer model, that opportunity is all but lost. In the activist model, that opportunity is co-opted by the media producers, who too closely equate their preferences with those of their readers and pursue

non-media agendas that may come back to haunt them. And in the paternalistic model, almost the opposite is true, as media producers become increasingly divorced from a readership with which they do not, in any case, identify. Moreover, in all of these models political communication is systematically marginalised or eliminated altogether. Thus, the loss of the direct relationship between publisher and reader has not been replaced by any viable mechanism of transmitting readers' preferences – and, more importantly, political perceptions – to writers, which would overcome the considerable barriers described above. It is the task of another piece of research to determine how such a mechanism may be created. What seems clear, however, is that even the freest of the Russian media are catastrophically failing to communicate.

Notes

- 1 *Russian Independent Print Media Program Annual Report FY-2005*. Moscow, New Eurasia Foundation, 2005.
- 2 All interviews and other information gathering on *SFD1* were conducted during a site visit on 10–11 November 2004.
- 3 All interviews and information gathering on *FEFD1* were conducted during a site visit on 31 January–1 February 2005.
- 4 Interviews on *CFD2* were conducted in Moscow on 21–3 December 2004.
- 5 Interviews on *VFD2* were conducted in Moscow on 21–3 December 2004.
- 6 Interviews and observations on *UFD1* were conducted in Moscow on 21–3 December 2004.
- 7 Interviews and other information gathering for *FEFD3* were conducted during a site visit on 27–8 January 2005.
- 8 Interviews and other information gathering for *FEFD4* were conducted during a site visit on 29 January 2005.
- 9 Interviews and other information gathering for *FEFD2* were conducted during a site visit on 24–5 January 2005.
- 10 Interviews and other information gathering on *FEFD6* were conducted during a site visit on 2–3 February 2005.
- 11 Interviews and other information gathering on *FEFD7* were conducted during a site visit on 4 February 2005.
- 12 Interviews and other information gathering on *FEFD5* were conducted during a site visit on 26 January 2005.